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Clementines

A lot of people understand that fresh oranges are best in the winter, but not many people understand that different varieties have particular seasons. You'll have better luck coming home with good oranges if you learn which varieties are in season when - and keep a simple guideline in mind when you're selecting them at the market. Oranges and *all* citrus fruit should be *heavy in the hand for its size*. This is a simple test and it's your most reliable guide for citrus fruit.

The two most familiar varieties are navel and Valencia oranges, which are very good but if you limit yourself to them, you're missing out on some real treats.

Clementine's are the tiniest of the mandarins. Imported from Spain, Morocco, and other parts of North Africa, clementines are a cross between a sweet orange and a Chinese mandarin. They are small, very sweet, and usually seedless. Most people think of clementines as small tangerines, but they're a different variety entirely, with a distinctive taste. The Clementine is an excellent eating orange. Its small size and lack of seeds make it particularly popular with kids. Clementines have been available in Europe for many years, but the market for them in the United States was made only a few years ago, when a devastating freeze in Florida made domestic oranges scarce and expensive. A lot of oranges, including clementines, were imported from Europe, and clementines started to catch on. Over the past few years they've become increasingly popular, and as the demand has gone up, so has the price.

The mandarin orange originated in the Far East and has been around since 2000 B.C. If you've never seen a fresh mandarin, you're in for a surprise - the rind is a brilliant emerald green, and the flesh a beautiful deep orange. In the United States mandarins are grown in Florida and California, but they're not often available fresh because canners buy them up. The flavor of a fresh mandarin is much better than that of the canned, however, the flesh is semisweet, with no netting and no seeds. A lot of people pass them by at our store because they think they're just green oranges - that is, until I cut into some and let them have a taste. Then they come back for more. When mandarins are available, you'll find them in produce markets in the late fall. They can be available for two or three months, but later in the season there is heavy competition from the canners. Don't pass up fresh mandarins if you see them.

Whatever the variety, look for oranges that are shiny and heavy in the hand. It's a primary rule for a number of fruits, but it's especially important for oranges. Check